

DR. SHERMAN CHARLES SWIFT

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DR. SHERMAN CHARLES SWIFT, LL. D.

Sherman Charles Swift, M.A., LL.D., who, on October 22nd, 1936, received an honorary degree of LL.D. from McGill University, is the librarian of The Canadian National Institute for the Blind. There are many men in Canada with a string of academic titles to their names as long or longer than that possessed by Dr. Swift, but he is the only blind man in the Dominion who is able to claim such distinction.

It was not quite a half-century ago that Sherman Swift, then a lad of eleven, was experimenting with the efficacy of gun-powder as a means of boring a toy oil-well. When the charge failed to explode, young Swift attempted to discover the cause. His impatience cost him his eyesight. The gun-powder exploded in his face and Sherman Swift has not known since that moment, the use of what is generally regarded as man's most precious sense.

There is no royal road to learning, but to the young man who must travel the steep path unaided by his eyes, the going presents difficulties hard to imagine and harder still to overcome.

Young Swift had taken his last lesson at the common public school. A year later he was a pupil in the Ontario School for the Blind at Brantford. There he learned Braille and took up music and a fair amount of devilry, for the students at the Brantford School do not differ in the abundance of their youthful spirits from those of any other school.

For five years Sherman Swift was a student at Brantford, and then, his parents having moved to the United States, he was enrolled at the Michigan State School for the Blind at Lansing, Michigan. At Lansing he completed his preliminary education.

Dr. Swift's family did not return to Canada but young Swift did not find the United States as satisfying a place to live as the country he remembered and loved before he was deprived of his sight and when he

determined to go on with his secondary education, he came back to his native town of Petrolia, Ontario, and entered high school. How Sherman Swift overcame the difficulties confronting a blind student taking the ordinary classes in a school where there were no other pupils similarly handicapped, is a story too long to be recited here, but by the use of concentrated attention to lectures and the laborious copying of Braille notes and with the assistance of friends and relatives who read to him, he not only managed to pass his examinations, but passed them with such satisfactory marks that he was regarded as one of the most proficient students in his graduating class.

There have been several blind graduates of McGill University, but none whose scholastic career has been marked with the success of that of Sherman Swift. He is still the only blind Canadian university graduate who chose and succeeded in a course of modern languages.

Dr. Swift's course through McGill was a succession of successes. Several exhibitions and scholarships were awarded him during his course and he received the bronze medal for public speaking in French and a silver medal for general proficiency in French, awarded by L'Alliance Francaise. In his final year his marks were within four of those of the graduate winning the gold medal.

Dr. Swift's first ambition had been to study law and practise that profession in Quebec, but financial considerations barred that path to him and he decided to turn to teaching. He enrolled with the newly formed Faculty of Education at the University of Toronto and, although he was prevented by illness from attending the fall term and did not actually commence the work until after Christmas, he was one of the eleven members of the university graduate section of the class to pass with honours in the spring. On account of his meritorious standing he had conferred upon him the degree of Master of Arts.

When Dr. Swift applied for a teaching certificate, the educational authorities were confronted with the first application from a man who wanted to teach and who had all the academic qualifications, but who could not use his eyes. The Department of Education refused to grant a teaching certificate. It was fifteen years later that the certificate was finally granted, and, although the document is still in Dr. Swift's possession, it is one of his assets that has never paid a dividend: by the time the license was granted, Dr. Swift was not a candidate for a teaching position.

Confronted with the task of making a living, and being better equipped to teach than to do anything else, Dr. Swift was compelled to seek pupils privately, and for five years he gave private lessons in modern languages.

During this period he became associated with the small group of men who had established the beginnings of a library for the blind in Ontario and in 1913, upon the retirement of the librarian, Mrs. Robinson, the widow of the founder and first librarian, Dr. Swift was appointed librarian of what had then come to be known as the Canadian Free Library for the Blind. He still holds that position, although in the meantime, the Library has become a branch of The Canadian National Institute for the Blind.

His experience during his first few years as secretary of the Library and, later on, as librarian, brought home to Dr. Swift the realization of the necessity for some kind of Dominion-wide organization devoted to the welfare of the blind. Although the existing schools for the blind were fairly efficient, there was little effort made to establish the graduates in gainful occupations and as far as men and women who became blind in adult years were concerned, there was comparatively little systematic effort to help them overcome their handicap.


About this time Dr. Swift became acquainted with Dr. C. R. Dickson, an eminent Toronto physician who had lost his sight, and in association with a few other blind people, they commenced to work towards the creation

of a Dominion-wide organization for the blind. Their efforts met with little success until the first Canadian blinded soldiers came home from France. Public interest, aroused by the success of the St. Dunstan's training school for blinded soldiers and the enthusiasm of Mr. A. G. Viets and Captain E. A. Baker, who were the first blinded soldiers to come home, made it possible to secure substantial public support for the project which Dr. Swift and his associates had been attempting to forward. In March, 1918, a Dominion charter was granted to The Canadian National Institute for the Blind and amongst the names appearing as petitioners for the charter are those of Dr. Swift, Dr. Dickson, Captain Baker, Mr. Veits and Mr. L. M. Wood, who has been president of the Institute ever since its formation.

In 1917 Dr. Swift married Miss Agnes H. Cole who had been associated with him in the conduct of the Library and who has collaborated with him ever since in what literary work he has had time to undertake.

During his association with the Library work, it has been Dr. Swift's privilege to assist many young blind Canadians to carry on with their higher educational studies. The knowledge gained by his experience has always been available to anyone who has applied to him. He has become widely known as an authority on library work for the blind and in conferences, held from time to time by those interested in standardizing Braille throughout the world, Dr. Swift has always taken a leading part. Part of the credit for the establishment of the universal system of Braille in use throughout the English-speaking world in place of the several systems which existed fifteen years ago, is due to Dr. Swift.

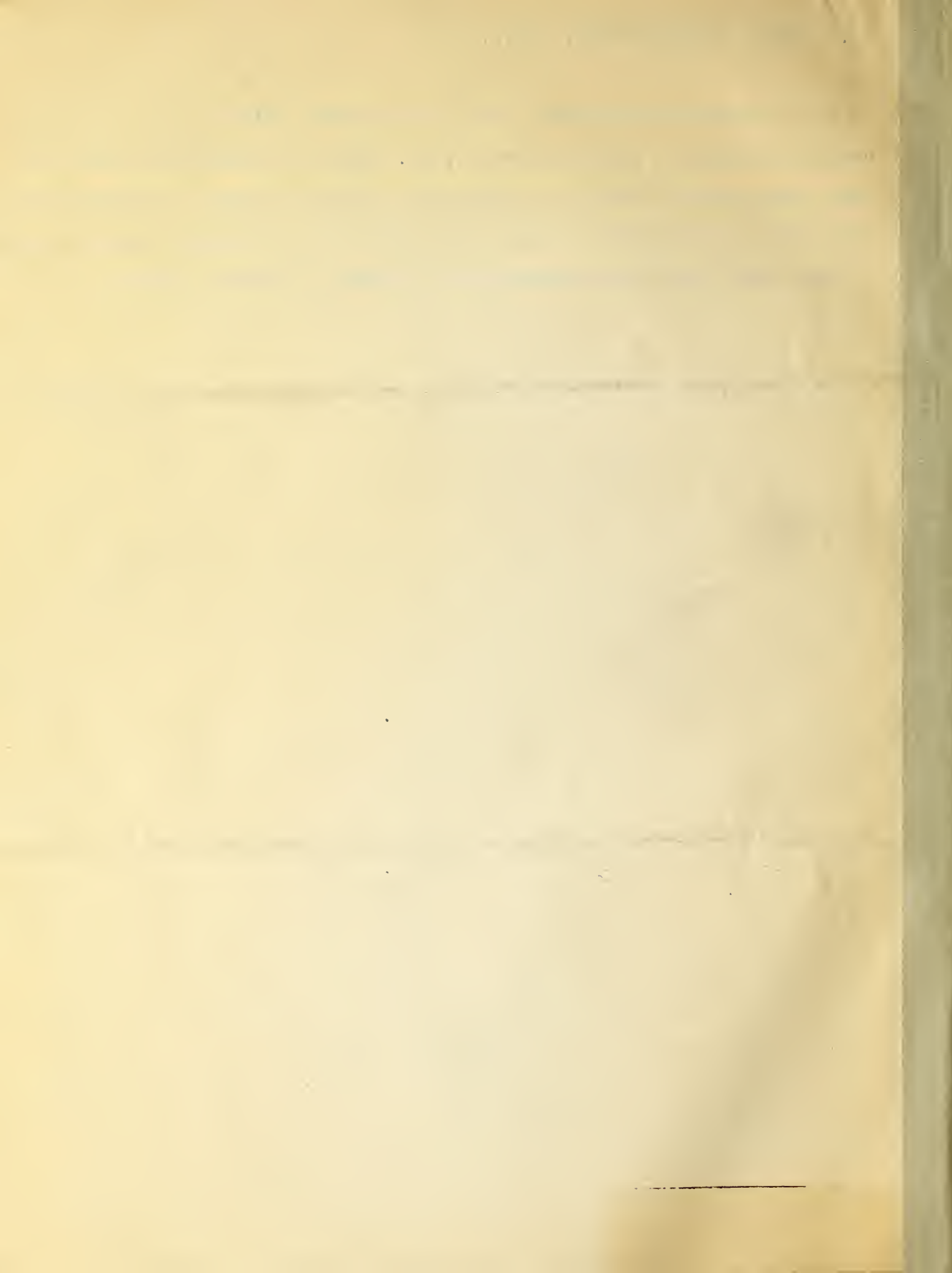
Duties connected with the library work and the task of maintaining his proficiency in French, German, Italian and Spanish, have left Dr. Swift little time for the field of literature, but he is a poet whose verses are well known in literary circles in Canada. In 1934, on the occasion



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of the ceremonies surrounding the four hundredth celebration of the discovery of Canada by Jacques Cartier, Dr. Swift, in association with the late Thomas Guthrie Marquis, published a volume of prose and verse which attracted very favorable views at the time and is treasured on the shelves of many book lovers who appreciate the works of Canadian authors.



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